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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings of a study that conceptualized how the mass media in England are involved in the education policy process, and identified major influences on media production and its link with education policy. The project is being conducted by the National Development Centre for Educational Management and Policy from October 1993 to May 1995. Methodology involves interviews with media professionals and representatives of other groups; content analysis of national media coverage of educational issues; and case studies of progressive education in British schools. It is argued that political debate, especially the antagonistic discourse over progressive versus traditional teaching methods, is a dialectical process of myth making and myth bashing. Media and political myths vary across several dimensions--the degree of simplification, the extent to which certain aspects are omitted, and the level of generalization. In a context of multiple education reform, the policy formation process may be viewed as a continuous dialectic between interest groups who are situated in four mutually influential contexts: the context of influence; the context of text production; the context of practice; and the media context. This paper discounts the theory of relative autonomy and asserts that the media and state are closely linked, and serve to legitimate capitalism. Some key areas for further inquiry are highlighted. One figure is included. Contains 21 references. (LMI)

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The Contribution of the Mass Media to the Education Policy Process

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THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE MASS MEDIA TO THE EDUCATION POLICY PROCESS

Introduction

The purposes of this paper are threefold: to highlight the significance of the mass media as an integral element of the process of education policy making and implementation; to report on the initial conceptualisation of current research into ways that the British press and broadcasting are implicated in this process (illustrated with some early findings); and to consider an agenda for research into the media and education policy.

The mass media (principally the press and broadcasting) help to inform education professionals and other members of the public about the educational concerns and policies of central government politicians. They are also a source of information for politicians about public opinion on existing policies and the need for new initiatives. The media convey messages between national policy makers and the public, including educational professionals in local education authorities (districts), schools and colleges who are responsible for implementing these policies. Yet little is known about how the media play their part in the policy process within the sphere of education.

It is striking how little attention has been paid to the media role in theoretical and descriptive analyses of education policy, the more so when considering the centrality accorded to the media in sociological accounts of the wider political process (e.g. Seymour-Ure 1974; Lang and Lang 1984; Curran and Seaton 1988; Negrine 1989). Speculatively, this situation may have arisen for at least two reasons: first, because the part overtly played by the media is merely to convey messages and to investigate and disseminate information about issues that are in the public interest. The media have no official role in policy making. Second, television, radio and press output is so much a part of our lives, whether as educators or students of policy, that it is largely subliminal - a taken for granted vehicle for the discourse which does hold our attention.

My own awareness of an integral and insidious media role was raised when unexpectedly confronted with a disjunction between a media account and the reality with which I happened to be familiar. One evening I watched a major current affairs television programme which depicted what were labelled as 'progressive' teaching practices in a primary school where I had been conducting fieldwork. The portrayal of the school was highly selective, focusing exclusively on informal teaching methods. The footage showed practices which were real enough, but taken out of context: no mention was made of the wide range of methods which I had witnessed, including free choice, exploratory activities and formal, didactic lessons. Hitherto I had accepted the output of this long established investigative programme as gospel!

When I returned to the school a few days later, staff informed me in detail about how they had been manipulated into participating in what they now regarded as a 'stitch up' by the media professionals who made the programme (see Wallace 1993). The programme makers had apparently come to the school with a preconceived idea of what they wanted to find, they had filmed only those practices that fitted with this idea, and subsequently edited out any material that did not fit the 'story' they were making. These media professionals did not just convey a message; they created it.

The significance of such a programme for the education policy process is suggested by its location within a wider political context. Its theme of conflict between progressive and traditional teaching methods had been promulgated by central government politicians during the annual conference (which received heavy media coverage) of the Conservative Party to which they belonged. According to one politician 'the canker of progressive education' was responsible for falling standards in schools, a problem which government ministers pledged to put right. This conference was unusually important. Government policies were of more than average public interest since a general election would have be held within the next few

months although no date had yet been announced. The programme makers had couched their investigation in the same conflictual terms as the politicians.

Yet at this time there was plentiful evidence from inspections and surveys of schools conducted by Her Majesty's Inspectors (which had been in the public domain for years but had received little media attention) that progressive teaching methods had never really caught on. A national survey (DES 1978) had found that just one in twenty primary school classrooms demonstrated a full commitment to exploratory methods. There appeared to be (probably unwitting) collusion between politicians and programme makers in creating and conveying messages which amounted to a myth.

Government politicians were soon to seek re-election, and needed new policies which would find favour with voters. This example of media output was congruent with the interests of government politicians in framing a 'problem' and drawing public attention to it in similar terms to their own. If parents or prospective parents among voters believed the myth, they might be persuaded to vote for the politicians who had vowed to crack the problem. This television programme was watched by around 15% of the voting population.

Rationale for the Research

The study is a starting point for filling a gap in our research knowledge and conceptualisation of the education policy process, especially significant in the present period of comprehensive educational reform in many western countries which has spawned a dramatically increased rate of policy changes. Scholarly accounts of this process in Britain appear to have underplayed the media role (e.g. Kogan 1975; Dale 1989; Ball 1990) and, although conceptualisation of education policy as a complex process has become more sophisticated in recent years, the media still scarcely figure. Much relevant groundwork has been done in theory development within media studies, and there is significant convergence between the major pluralist and neo-Marxist perspectives within the hitherto independent fields of media and education policy studies (see Wallace 1993). The research draws on this parallel development in developing a conceptual bridge between these two areas of enquiry.

The objectives of the study are to conceptualise how the mass media are involved in the education policy process, and to identify major influences on media production and output and their link with education policy. The project is being undertaken by the National Development Centre for Educational Management and Policy and is funded by the Leverhulme Trust from October 1993 to May 1995.

Research Methods

The investigation is exploratory, intended to offer insights into selected areas rather than to attempt comprehensive coverage of the field. There are several foci for data collection based on document survey and interviews, which are being addressed simultaneously:

- interviews are being conducted with a sample of media professionals (such as journalists, reporters and producers) and representatives of other groups concerned with education policy and the media (such as politicians, civil servants, press officers and headteachers);

- education policy areas covering mainstream schooling which are addressed by the national media over the calendar year 1994 are being monitored by sampling the output of the education press and news and current affairs broadcasts;

- a case study is being conducted of the recent national debate in Britain about progressive education, especially in primary schools, during 1991 and 1992;

- a small number of more limited case studies will examine specific topics arising during the year.

Theoretical Orientation

The education policy process is regarded as a semi-pluralistic interaction between interest groups, following Lindblom's (1983) notion of 'pluralism II'. There is an oligarchic tendency in this interaction: some groups (like government politicians and industrialists) have disproportionate influence while others (such as minority ethnic groups, students and, increasingly in recent years, educational researchers) are marginalised. Three major groups, each of which may be subdivided, are politicians, education professionals and media professionals.

There is considerable overlap between the currency of discourse of politicians and media professionals. The former tend towards the use of simple assertions and generalisations (often unbacked by evidence) which are positive in relation to their own policies and antagonistic to those of the political parties in opposition. Media professionals tend also to communicate through a language and imagery which simplify social reality so that messages may be easily received by a mass audience with limited specialised knowledge of the policy area in question. The interests of politicians and media professionals converge in seeking to use a largely one way form of communication based on simple messages, exemplified in the extensive use of 'soundbites' and slogans. Politicians may attempt to influence voters; media professionals may try to achieve high audience ratings needed for continued public funding (in the case of the British Broadcasting Corporation), or large sales which will continue to attract revenue from advertisers.

MYTH AND COUNTER MYTH

The core concept to be employed is the notion of *myth*, following Bailey (1977), who applied it to university politics in the USA. He regards myth as 'an oversimplified representation of a more complex reality'. Myths are the currency for advancing one view in the face of an opposing view. Bailey argues that 'politics is the art of bringing unacceptable myths into, and preserving one's own myths from derision'. Political debate is fundamentally antagonistic; and the more public it is, suggests Bailey, the simpler and less reconcilable become the myths and counter myths. By contrast, when away from the public gaze, protagonists are more likely to search pragmatically for middle ground. Such oppositional discourse seems to be the stuff of politics in general, consisting of a dialectical process of *myth making and myth bashing*.

In the example of progressive versus traditional teaching methods outlined above, government politicians created the myth of progressivism in order to deride it, claiming that it was a policy of the opposing political party. Their favoured myth, offered as a solution to the supposed decline in educational standards caused by progressivism, was a return to traditional teaching methods. (Aficionados of British politics will be aware that these myths remain alive and well in the Prime Minister's current 'back to basics' theme.)

A political discourse of derision based on opposing myths is congruent with the conflictual, sometimes sensational and usually simplified discourse favoured by many media professionals concerned with policy matters. A common technique in current affairs broadcasting is to make a simplistic assertion, as with the television programme discussed earlier, and to back it with a brief case study which is presented as if it represents the general case. The 'progressive primary school' portrayed in the television programme discussed earlier was used to exemplify primary schools which employed progressive teaching methods. Another techique of simplification in media myth making is what I have labelled as *context stripping*: much of the context of this school was omitted in the media account so as to communicate a clear message - at the price of considerable distortion.

Myths relating to education policy amount to *ideology* where they both represent an incomplete view of social reality and support partisan political interests. Interest groups vary widely, and include teachers' unions, governors' organizations, government quangos, local level administrators, politicians from particular parties, and media professionals. Couching the television programme in terms of progressivism effectively publicised the government politicians' way of framing the debate.

Pluralism applies not only to the range of interest groups, but also to the different experiences of individuals and groups involved in the link between the media and the education policy process. People in different professions, or those working in different contexts, occupy contrasting experiential *life worlds* (Schutz 1972). Groups from different professions, who rarely meet face to face, are likely to have differing assumptions about the values and working practices of each other.

The life worlds of the primary school staff and the current affairs programme team were poles apart. The values expressed by team members were radically different from those of the primary school staff, none of whom had ever dealt with media professionals before. The teachers had anticipated that their practice, of which they were proud, would be reported accurately. The programme makers, however, were also doing their normal job: getting what they needed for a good story. Analysis of the process of media involvement in education policy must grasp how media professionals, their sources, and their audiences exist in different life worlds which, nevertheless, interact within the process of media production.

Media (and political) myths vary across several dimensions, including:

- the degree of simplification, from very crude assertions to sophisticated accounts;
- the extent to which they omit aspects of the reality they purport to encompass;
- their level of generalisation, whether concerned with a single case at one extreme, or a national or international situation at the other.

Much media discourse related to education policy follows political discourse in creating myth and counter myth. Rarely, however, the attempt is made to *demythologise*, according to values which relate more closely to the discourse of research. Such media output, often contributed by education professionals, is more stringent in using sufficient evidence to back an assertion, avoiding the overgeneralisation and oversimplification so characteristic of most media discourse. Such output is likely to appear in the form of articles and programmes which reach a relatively small audience, but of whom a significant proportion are involved in some way in the making of education policy.

Statements from a major evaluation report on primary education in one local education authority were frequently cited in front page press articles about the progressive teaching methods debate. The author of the report, an academic within the education establishment, attempted to demythologise the media accounts. His access to the media was controlled by media professionals, and the output in which he was able to point out inaccuracies of interpretation and examples of overgeneralisation was restricted to what the media professionals were willing to publish: short letters and a few articles published in the middle pages of newspapers.

The Power of News Values

Media professionals decide what to cover and and how to interpret statements and events according to their *news values* (Barrat 1986; Dutton 1986). The mix of news values varies between individuals according to their personal professional values, and is also influenced by the dominant news values within their section of television, radio or the press. The following illustrative list includes examples taken from British national evening television news programmes (BBC Nine O'Clock News and ITV News at Ten, and their weekend

equivalents, monitored between December 1993 and February 1994. A total of 36 items related to education policy. News values include:

- tailoring the issue to fit the slot available (the weekday news bulletins each consisted of about twelve items over half an hour. Most of the education policy items consisted of soundbites of two to three minutes duration, imposing tight limits on the breadth and depth of coverage);

- activities of government are more newsworthy than those of politicians in opposition (only four items did not relate directly to government policy, and opposition parties were represented solely in terms of their response to government announcements);

- a focus on problems or opposition over government policy (the threat of a major teachers' union to continue an existing boycott of national tests for pupils was repeatedly reported);

- the competitive strength of any statement or event must be weighed up against with other newsworthy items (of the 36 bulletins that included an education policy related item, the median ranking of this item was sixth, and it was the main story on only two occasions. About three quarters of the bulletins monitored contained no education policy item);

- novelty (the first two schools judged under new national inspection arrangements to be failing their pupils made the national news whereas those identified subsequently did not);

- conflict (an investigative report of government discussions about placing a ban on cigarette advertising within a mile of schools highlighted the antagonism of the billboard companies who stood to lose revenue);

- a focus on personalities (after announcement of the report of a major review of the curriculum commissioned by the government, its author was profiled in one item, involving a visit to his old school);

- sensationalism (one item reported - with graphic footage - the Secretary of State for Education being pelted with eggs when giving a speech to higher education students. No reference was made to the education policy to which the incident referred. He was responsible for making cuts in government financing of students);

- hypocrisy or foolishness (four items reported on a primary school headteacher who refused an invitation for pupils to see a ballet performance of Romeo and Juliet on the grounds that the play portrayed a heterosexual relationship as the norm for society. The story was couched in terms of the folly of 'political correctness').

Media professionals wield considerable power over what is covered and how it is presented, bounded by laws (which often prove difficult to enforce). In Britain, the laws of press ownership allow for political allegiance, which is mostly to the Conservative Party, and critique of government. Broadcasting is required to be politically impartial, and programmes tend to contrast opposing viewpoints, rather than support the position of any political party. Apart from party political broadcasts or advertising in the press, politicians have no means of assuring that the message they wish to communicate is actually covered or presented in a favourable light.

The news values of media professionals and the interests of politicians or education professionals do not always coincide, the former often causing great embarrassment to the latter. The media operate as a *loose cannon*, framing the communication of messages according to media interests first and foremost. Politicians make great efforts to secure the kind of publicity they want because, ultimately, they depend on the support of the voting

public and, in the case of education policy, on the compliance of education professionals. Strategies include offering photo-opportunities or soundbites, issuing press releases and holding press conferences, writing articles, or deliberately leaking information about a policy change prior to its announcement.

One item in each of the television news bulletins mentioned above was about an article by the Prime Minister, setting out his commitment to increasing the provision of nursery education. The bulletin presenter announced that an article would appear the following day in a national newspaper with close links to the Conservative Party. Certain education professionals, such as teachers' union or local administrators' association representatives, similarly seek media attention.

Media professionals make equally great efforts to secure newsworthy stories, whether overtly by interviewing politicians or by lobbying, or more or less covertly by undertaking investigative activities which uncover political activity hitherto excluded from the public domain, by persuading people in the know such as civil servants to leak information, or by monitoring the activities of competing media professionals and their output. The story about the headteacher who refused to allow pupils to see Romeo and Juliet was originally unearthed by local reporters and was rapidly taken up by the national media.

Putting the Media in their Place

The media lie at the centre of a web of relationships between the diverse interest groups with a stake in policy development and implementation at central, local and institutional levels. While the formal links between policy makers and implementors do not include media involvement, the media form a major communication channel between the various players and inform the public at large.

There is ample evidence from North American work in the local educational change process (e.g. Berman and McLaughlin 1978; Fullan 1991) and policy implementation traditions (e.g. Boyd 1988; Odden 1991) that the policy process includes a substantial element of 'mutual adaptation' between the intentions behind policy statements and what (if anything) is actually implemented at the institutional level. In a context of multiple education reform, the policy process may arguably be best conceived as a continuous dialectic between interest groups, rather than a strict sequence of generation followed by implementation of discrete policies. Bowe and Ball (1992) argue that policy generation and implementation interpenetrate, and divide the arena of policy generation into two elements. Their simple process model was designed to grasp the process relating to major British reforms including the national curriculum. It consists of three mutually influential contexts:

- the *context of influence*, within and around central government, where interest groups including politicians and representatives of education professionals debate fundamental purposes and broad policy ideas. Much of this context lies outside the public domain. The media are seen to play a supporting or challenging role within such of the context that is public;

- the *context of text production*, where civil servants, government quango officials, and sometime education professionals engage in negotiation which often produces official policy texts which diverge from their initiators' intent;

- the *context of practice*, at local and institutional levels, where policy texts are reinterpreted as they become adapted to implementors' interests.

Policies are continually in flux; evaluation of their impact, often while they are still being introduced, may stimulate interest groups within the context of influence to modify the original policy or develop a new one.

I wish to extrapolate from this model by adding another dimension: the *media context* (see Figure 1). This context may be placed in the middle of the triangle formed by the contexts of influence, text production, and practice. It consists of the media process:

- o selection of issues according to news values, from material either sought or received from interest groups in the other three contexts;
- o production of myth and counter myth whose characteristics vary according to the intended mass audience;
- o output which may be received by interest groups in the three contexts and by other members of the public.

(INSERT FIGURE 1)

While interest groups in the other three contexts communicate without the media, much information received on education policy issues - especially within the context of practice - may be gleaned from media output. The selection and 'slant' of media output may therefore influence policy intentions, the form taken by official texts, and the practices of those who are required to implement policies.

The Thesis of Relative Autonomy

While media involvement in the education policy process is semi-pluralistic (if oligarchic), there are underlying economic links with capitalism which parallel the linkage between state education and the economy highlighted by radical theorists (e.g. Dale 1989). Synthesis of pluralistic and radical perspectives on educational policy has been achieved by proposing that there is relative autonomy between the economy and the state, so allowing for a variety of interest groups but assuming that a small number have the greatest control over the process.

Students of the media (e.g. Murdoch and Golding 1977) have argued similarly that there is *relative autonomy* between the media and the state (hence my typification of the media as a loose cannon). However, at a deeper level, there are close links between the two. Apart from the BBC, the British media are part of the private sector, and they therefore exist to make a profit. It is unlikely to be coincidence that most British newspapers favour the Conservative Party - the party of free enterprise. Sources of income include sales of newspapers and programmes and the massive income from advertising. Government media policy is increasingly to apply market economics to the BBC: more programmes are now made commercially and bought in rather than being made by BBC employees.

Education policy itself includes the instrumental aim of supplying tomorrow's compliant and skilled workforce to a capitalist economy, and coverage by the media contributes to both the creation of such policy and the creation of conditions where it will be accepted by education professionals and the general public. It seems plausible that, like the process of education, the media help to create conditions which are not inimical to capitalism, legitimate capitalism, and in most cases actually assist in capital accumulation. The media may act as a loose cannon, but not a free one.

An Agenda for Research

The preliminary conceptualisation offered here, coupled with the lack of research into the link between the media and education policy, together suggest that there is plenty of work to be done. The structure of public education, the policy process and the legal and economic circumstances of different media are quite different in North America (Fink 1990) from the situation in Britain on which this paper is based. Some key areas of enquiry include:

- relevant myths and counter myths created by media professionals and politicians, the range of their characteristics, and the nature of the discourse of derision between myth and counter myth;
- the evolution of media involvement in the genesis and implementation of particular policies;
- the profile of media involvement in the range of education policies that are evolving at any time;
- the process of media selection, production and output, including interaction between the life worlds of media professionals and their sources among politicians and education professionals;
- efforts of politicians and education professionals to attract, influence or avoid media coverage;
- marginalisation by media professionals of interest groups with a stake in education policy;
- competition between media organizations and its impact on the coverage of education policy issues;
- analysis of the varied combinations of news values expressed by media professionals from different organizational contexts;
- impact of media output on politicians, education professionals, and the voting behaviour of the general public;
- education policy generation and media attention at different periods in the life of a government;
- the extent and limits of relative autonomy between the media and the state, focusing on education policy;
- comparative accounts of the media role in the education policy process in different countries.

We need a more comprehensive conceptual map and far greater empirical knowledge of the place of the mass media within education policy in national and local contexts. This research and theoretical understanding could contribute to the radical perspective which attempts to explain the perpetuation of social inequalities in western capitalist countries while allowing for a loose relationship between the economy, the media, the state and education.

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Figure 1: Location of the Mass Media within the Education Policy Process